



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

Day, D and Harris, L (2018) "Who in England cares about the champion spear tosser?" Field Events and the British Athletic Psyche before World War One. *Journal of Sport History*, 45 (2). pp. 165-182. ISSN 0094-1700

---

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621351/>

**Publisher:** University of Illinois Press

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

**"Who in England cares about the champion spear tosser?" Field Events and the British Athletic Psyche  
before First World War.**

**Abstract**

*The British Olympic Association was formed by men whose class attitudes were reflected in their adherence to traditional notions of amateurism. An emphasis on elegance and a suspicion of professional coaches were central to their ethos and resulted in the middle-class amateur focusing on events that accommodated the symmetrical body while avoiding events that demanded a more proletarian, highly trained functional body. The result was the almost complete absence of amateurs from the field events arena to the long-term detriment of the competitiveness of British international teams, although between the 1908 London Games and the outbreak of War in 1914 efforts were made to redress the balance between track and field. Using press reports and organizational archives, this paper uncovers some of these initiatives and concludes that their failure to make a difference is confirmation of how deeply amateur values had been embedded within the British athletic system.*

KEYWORDS: Athletes Advisory Club, Amateur Field Events Association, amateurism, coaching

**INTRODUCTION**

The British Olympic Association (BOA) was created in 1905 by a group of aristocratic and educated middle-class men who typified British administrators of sport in this period.<sup>1</sup> They were wedded to the concept of amateurism and their class attitudes were reflected in the way their emphasis on style and suspicion of professional coaches, who produced muscular, specialized sporting bodies, featured in their approach to elite sport. Llewellyn and Gleaves highlighted that the “invented tradition” of British amateurism represented a “bold proclamation of the immutability of the British class system” and, throughout the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras, middle-class administrators and participants used the concept of the “university athlete”, an all-rounder who avoided the specialist techniques honed through physical and event-specific training needed for field events, to distinguish themselves from other social classes in the athletic arena.<sup>2</sup> As with all aspects of the amateur ethos, the boundaries between class attitudes to the ideal athletic body and to its preparation were always blurred but the following narrative is predicated on the notion that the majority of professional middle-class administrators and international representatives shared similar values with respect to amateurism and the athletic body.<sup>3</sup> The long-term impact of their perspective on British athletics is reflected by the way in which decisions made about what

were, or were not, suitable athletic events for the gentleman have underpinned the event preferences of British athletes over the succeeding century.<sup>4</sup>

Amateurism normalized and standardized a bodily performance as the middle-class amateur focused on events that accommodated the symmetrical body and avoided those that demanded a more proletarian, highly trained functional body. While some historians have considered the English amateur body, they have not addressed the impact that this aesthetic had on athletic preferences and how amateur views of the athletic body contributed to an ongoing weakness in British field events.<sup>5</sup> These deficiencies were obvious to contemporaries and, between the London Olympics and the outbreak of War in 1914, efforts were made to redress the balance between track and field. Using press reports and organizational archives, this paper uncovers some of these initiatives, specifically the formation of the Athletes Advisory Club (AAC) and the Amateur Field Events Association (AFEA), organizations that have received some limited scholarly attention but have not been studied in detail or linked to the athletic philosophy that prevailed in Britain at that time.<sup>6</sup>

The problem facing those who wished to improve Britain's field event performances was that widespread cultural change was required to aspects of British athletic and generic sporting identity, including conflicts of interest, commercialization and the notion of the "university athlete." Early amateur contests had taken on many characteristics of professional events, but the educated classes increasingly began to form separate, more exclusive organizations, and when former Oxbridge athletes created the Amateur Athletic Club in 1865, it was so they could compete, "without being compelled to mix with professional runners."<sup>7</sup> The subsequent formation of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) in 1880 centralized the organization of athletics and excluded professionals. The public school and university men who created these clubs and associations prided themselves on their educational backgrounds and their familiarity with the Classics, in which intellectuals had criticized athletes for over-specialization, to the detriment of a balanced development of the body.<sup>8</sup>

Nineteenth-century amateurs based their sporting ethos on these principles and elegance of style and effortless achievement, without the need for coaching or hard physical training, became their ideal, with gentlemen amateurs reviving a classical ideal of human proportion, balancing height, weight, muscle development and mobility.<sup>9</sup> For medical doctor Henry Hoole, the university ideal of a perfect athlete was "70 inches high and 168 lbs. in weight," a symmetrical athletic body that avoided any outward show of specialization or excessive muscularity.<sup>10</sup> This "university athlete" became a reference point through which the professional middle-class differentiated themselves from other sportsmen. Working-class bodies invariably lay outside these

norms, as did those of wrestlers, throwers, and weightlifters, while the extensive physical training and specialization required to produce these bodies was considered more appropriate to a manual worker or to a professional athlete than to a gentleman amateur. As a result, the athletic events preferred were middle rather than long distance events, which required hard training, while field events were to be avoided, partly because the body type required for throwing was more akin to that of a muscular working-class laborer but also because technical events needed specialist coaching.<sup>11</sup> Given this body aesthetic, and widespread resistance to both specialization and technical coaching, it is not surprising that British international athletic teams struggled to find suitable field event competitors. In 1895, when London Athletic Club (LAC) were whitewashed by New York Athletic Club (NYAC), Watson, representing LAC, apparently did not understand the "first rudiments" of the shot put while Robertson of LAC had failed to learn American hammer throwing rules and "behaved as if he did not want to be there."<sup>12</sup>

#### FIELD EVENT PERFORMANCES AND INITIATIVES

The "university athlete" ideal contributed to a reluctance among English clubs and athletes to engage with field events and the only major interest, particularly in throwing, came from Scotland or Ireland, where athletes were familiar with similar events at the Highland and Tailteann Games. Javelin throwing, a feature of the Ancient Olympics, was apparently included in the Tailteann Games, while Webster believed that the hammer throw had its origins in mediaeval England and noted that it had been part of the "English Championships" since 1866. The 56lb weight throw was Celtic in origin. Webster stated that "is an almost unknown event in England, but it is still popular in both Ireland and Scotland", although the real home of the event was America, where the sport "came into vogue" in the early 1860s. Discus throwing was the "most classical of all the sports practised at the present day", with Homer having repeatedly referred to the event, while jumping and shot put, which was popular in both Scotland and Ireland, had long been part of the Tailteann Games.<sup>13</sup>

Following the inaugural AAA Championships in 1880, Irishmen dominated field events and by the end of the century Irish athletes had won over fifty percent of long jump and three quarters of 16lb weight category titles, including an unbroken sequence of six victories by Denis Horgan.<sup>14</sup> At the 1908 Olympics, when Britain won just three field events medals, two were won by Irish athletes.<sup>15</sup> The best field event performance by a non-Irish athlete was fourth place in the hammer by Scotsman Thomas Nicolson and most British athletes failed to make finals. Overall, the athletic events proved a disappointment for Britain whose athletes won seventeen

medals, of which seven were gold, whereas her chief rival, the United States of America (USA), won sixteen of the twenty-seven available athletic events, including eight of the fifteen field events. Four years later at Stockholm, and excluding the victory of Greek Konstantinos Tsiklitis in the standing long-jump, all the Olympic field event titles went to American, Swedish or Finnish athletes. Given the status afforded to field events in Britain this was no surprise. The javelin, discus and triple jump events were not part of the AAA Championships, and this attitude had filtered down into other meetings. While this owed much to attitudes towards aesthetics and coaching, commercialism was also a significant factor. Running and walking events brought spectators and money through the gate, whereas field events were considered "unspectacular" and "less susceptible to commercial exploitation."<sup>16</sup> Webster attributed the success of other nations not only to the attention they paid to technique, but also to "the encouragement given by the spectators," whereas in Britain, field events were considered "slow burners," which failed to interest spectators because they occupied too much time and lacked the same thrills as track events.<sup>17</sup> This was reflected in a *Times* report on the 1908 Greek discus event. It was "generally believed that spectators do not care to watch these feats of agility and strength; and where a number of weak competitors have to be eliminated they are apt to become rather wearisome."<sup>18</sup> A similar comment, this time on the javelin event, came from C.B. Fry, who remarked; "Who in England cares about the champion spear tosser?"<sup>19</sup>

Athletes and officials of the period were aware of the problem and there were sporadic, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to improve the situation. Two organizations, the AAC and the AFEA, emerged in the pre-War period to try to improve field event performances, prompted by the widespread feeling that British failures were not the result of a lack of material but because "scientific training and coaching" was required.<sup>20</sup> The AAC was primarily concerned with discovering and developing young athletes for the future, while the principal function of the AFEA was to recruit competitors for the 1916 Olympics, partly through the award of standard medals to identify potential Olympic candidates.<sup>21</sup> Despite these differences, the organizations had a degree of synchronicity in their approaches and A.B. George emphasized in 1913 that the AAC was always looking to assist the AFEA and the AAA in improving the standard of athletics.<sup>22</sup> Recognizing that good coaching was lacking and believing that athletic clubs could not afford talented professional instructors, both organizations proposed enlisting the services of old amateur athletes who would be willing to give their time to training promising newcomers.

## ATHLETES' ADVISORY CLUB

Writing in 1909, A.B. George noted, "Most of our ancestors were sportsmen and there is no doubt that the average Englishman is fitted by nature and temperament to excel at sports." For him, the ground lost by British athletes internationally was due to a resistance to new styles and methods, rather than any "inferiority in strength, stamina and pluck." For years, Englishmen had made a "wretched showing" in field events and he proposed forming "The Field Sports and Athletes Advisory Club" (FSAAC) to address this issue.<sup>23</sup> He later recorded that the AAA had made a start by granting £60 to each of its Districts, partly to provide implements, but that much more was required before England could match the USA in these events. The greatest handicap was the lack of efficient coaches and this could only be redressed through the formation of an FSAAC.<sup>24</sup>

It was another two years, however, before his proposal came to fruition when he led a group of enthusiasts in forming the AAC, which it was hoped would, "induce old athletes of experience to act as amateur advisers and coaches to young athletes," help discover new athletic talent, and hold meetings to discuss diet, technique, and training.<sup>25</sup> The club was dominated by Oxbridge graduates, men who not only had the enthusiasm but also the financial security that enabled them to donate time and money. Following one meeting of the AAC, an attendee observed that every influential member of the committee "was a university man" and argued that the opportunities available to non-university men within the club were limited. Inevitably, therefore, the AAC adhered to the accepted amateur discourse on coaching, with a committee member suggesting that, "a gentleman athlete could only hope to be properly coached by a man who was also a gentleman," a perspective described by one reporter as "snobbery."<sup>26</sup> These tensions were reflected in an essential dichotomy within the AAC membership about the way forward. One viewpoint was that only the university type of athlete, who could pay his own expenses, should be encouraged, while those on the other extreme believed that the Games should be made democratic, as in Sweden, and that anyone good enough to compete should be supported. These views were held strongly by opposing parties and former President of the Oxford University Athletic Club, W. Beach-Thomas, was still arguing in 1912 that these differences should be resolved as soon as possible.<sup>27</sup>

At its formation in 1911, the *Observer* was optimistic about the potential of the AAC, remarking that the "right men" were on the committee,<sup>28</sup> and, in some limited respects, the AAC did achieve its objectives, holding technical meetings on marathon running, and arranging lectures and lanternslides of photographs taken at the 1912 Olympics by Dr Adolphe Abrahams.<sup>29</sup> It also allocated club funds for the purchase of impedimenta to be used by district advisers in the development of potential athletes.<sup>30</sup> It was far less successful, however, in

achieving its goal of replacing professional trainers with amateurs. A.B. George argued that only amateur coaches had any original ideas about training and that they had been responsible for any innovations in competitive sport. All the professionals had ever done was to "stand around and listen to the talk of amateurs and then afterwards the pros would try to make use of the wrinkle."<sup>31</sup> The AAC had enlisted dozens of national representatives and Oxbridge Blues as potential coaches and he assumed that their experience inevitably made them "qualified to instruct and coach" but many professionals believed that amateur coaching was often worse than useless.<sup>32</sup>

The coaching side of the club's work was widely discussed in America where the AAC was seen as an attempt to improve for Stockholm by Englishmen "still sore over America's victory" at the 1908 Olympics. S.S. Abrahams was quoted as saying, "We ought to send to America for trainers as the Swedes have done," while Charles Otway of *Sporting Life*, reportedly believed that, "We will have to train our boys or we will never equal the Americans."<sup>33</sup> *Sporting Life* further noted that every American college, university or club, had professional coaches who made a lifelong study of their sports and whose livelihood depended upon competitive success. European countries were adopting American methods and both Sweden and Germany had appointed coaches who had experience of working in the USA. The success of Sweden, with its small population and its comparative newness to athletics, was a tribute to the thoroughness of the American system.<sup>34</sup>

The AAC had a hard struggle during its existence, primarily because of the lack of support.<sup>35</sup> According to A.B. George, AAC members had given up time and money and put in a lot effort to bring about an improvement but, instead of being praised, they had been "coldly received" and "cruelly assailed and misrepresented." Some of their severest critics were "self-styled authorities" who thought they ought to be the leaders in any reform movement. He knew several enthusiastic university men who would gladly help to bring about an improvement in athletics but who were not inclined to have "their motives misstated by socialistic critics who are openly hostile to the Empire."<sup>36</sup> Eventually, of course, the First World War formally ended the activity of the AAC.<sup>37</sup> Interviewed by the Decies Commission in 1923, A.B. George denied that the AAC had failed to meet its objectives, although fellow founder member, Dr A. Abrahams, believed that it had been a "distinct failure." They had had several excellent members but they had never been recognized and they had been handicapped by being accused of self-advancement. In addition, although members were specialists in different branches of the sport and wanted to impart their experience to enthusiasts, they had never attracted the right people. For

Abrahams, even if they had been an officially recognized body, they would have still been unsuccessful and he thought that the idea would never take on in Britain.<sup>38</sup>

#### AMATEUR FIELD EVENTS ASSOCIATION (AFEA)

Coinciding with the AGM of the AAA on 6 May 1910, the AFEA was formed at the Manchester Hotel, Aldergate Street, London. The meeting was chaired by British Olympic Council member, G.S. Robertson, a noted field event enthusiast, and amongst those attending were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who became the AFEA's President, and Frederick Annesley Michael (F.A.M.) Webster, who became the association's honorary secretary.<sup>39</sup> Webster wanted to end the "lack of opportunity" that had plagued field events development by establishing regular AFEA events and an annual championship, alongside encouraging clubs to include field events within their meetings.<sup>40</sup> The Association produced an initial three-point plan to achieve its aims, involving providing impediments for the use of AFEA affiliated clubs, keeping a register of athletes who took part in field events, informing them of meetings at which their events were available, and recording meetings at which field events were included.

One of the key outcomes of the formation meeting was the establishment of an advisory board of field event specialists with a mandate to ensure proper techniques were demonstrated to the next generation.<sup>41</sup> The AFEA also stated it wanted to take over the organization of field events (with the consent of the AAA) and to be active in the development of field events in the public schools.<sup>42</sup> The board hoped to see notable improvements by the time of the 1912 Olympics, although it was recognized that this would probably only occur in jumping events, which already had something of a following. Such were the existing shortcomings in throwing events, the *Athletic News* believed any improvement might not be apparent until 1920.<sup>43</sup> To improve knowledge of these events it was proposed to send officials abroad "to learn something of the methods employed in each country" with plans formulated for Lord Desborough and A.B. George to visit America and for Rev. De Courcy Laffan to visit Sweden.<sup>44</sup>

Following the creation of the AFEA, regional meetings were held in Birmingham and Leeds to establish Midlands and Northern AFEAs.<sup>45</sup> The Midland County Amateur Athletic Association (MCAAA) promoted field events by holding specific field event meetings across the region, with winners receiving a gold medal,<sup>46</sup> and in the North, H. Jennings of Bradford established a Yorkshire AFEA, with the support of a number of county clubs.<sup>47</sup> In the South, issues between the AAA and National Cycling Union over control of athletic and cycling events held



back developments, but this situation was rectified in 1911 following the establishment of a Southern Region Association, which quickly became the most active district in the promotion of field events.<sup>48</sup> In 1912, it sponsored the "new" events of discus, javelin and pole vault at its annual championships, although the latter event did not materialize because there were no entries.

#### PREPARING FOR STOCKHOLM

The lack of interest in field events meant that there were widespread shortages in equipment and facilities, an issue that both the AAA and the AAC attempted to tackle in 1910 by allowing clubs to borrow equipment free of charge for meetings. The problem was that there was not enough equipment to go around and the AAA's financial shortcomings prevented it from purchasing more apparatus.<sup>49</sup> There was also a lack of qualified officials and in July, a *Times* editorial, which described many current judges as "incompetent," argued that the AFEA needed to train new ones.<sup>50</sup> The multitude of problems faced by the AFEA ensured that its progress was slow throughout its first summer. Charles Otway argued that they were not doing the basics properly and that his newspaper was doing more to promote field events, evidencing this by pointing out that *Sporting Life* had promoted twenty events in one week while the AFEA had promoted just a solitary event in Leeds. A week later, he bemoaned the AFEA's failure to deliver on its promise of holding its own championships in 1910.<sup>51</sup> The *Athletic News* review of the 1910 AAA championships further highlighted a shortage of both top quality and emerging field event athletes. The quality of entrants for the hammer competition had been "shambolic" and "not since the days of the wooden handled hammer has a poorer throw won." The high jump, where athletes took off from a slippery surface, was won by "an even poorer jump than that of last year," while thirty-nine-year-old Denis Horgan retained the shot put title "with the poorest effort he has shown since 1894."<sup>52</sup>

A summary of the first year of the existence of the AFEA in June 1911 emphasized that the Association had had little success in changing the national perception of these events:

Good work...has been done by the Amateur Field Events Association, but that body has not had the support it deserves. Sports promoters will tell you they have no room for the majority of field events upon their programmes, that there are items the public do not care to see, and that they have to consider the paying public.<sup>53</sup>

Ignoring the fact that British athletes had never been preeminent in field events, the writer continued by arguing that the quality of the American and Swedish athletes was such that "unless strenuous efforts are made England will be absolutely outclassed, and must lose that supremacy which she has for so long held." Nevertheless, 1911 marked one major step forward when the AAA organized meetings that comprised field events not included within its annual championships as part of an attempt to "rehabilitate British athletics before the next Olympics."<sup>54</sup> While these competitions witnessed no significant performances, their organization is important because it marked the first time that England's ruling body had made active moves to promote previously marginalized field events. Elsewhere, the AFEA continued to organize championships at local competitions and, although these received little public support or media interest, they presented an opportunity for athletes to compete in events that were ignored by many meetings.<sup>55</sup>

In January 1912, Fred Parker of the LAC was appointed as "Chief Athletic Advisor" to the AAA with a remit to improve the fortunes of Britain's track and field athletes. One of his early tasks was to survey athletic facilities and he presented his findings to the AAA in March 1912, observing that, despite the work of the AFEA and AAA, field athletes were still having problems:

There are numerous complaints as to lack of implements - discus, javelin, hammer, weight, jumping standards, and - more particularly - "pits" for high and pole jumps, shot-putting, hop-step-and-jump, etc. ...the Hammer, Javelin and Discus require a separate ground, and [it]...is unreasonable to expect that learners should...practice these events at random within the arena of any ordinary track.<sup>56</sup>

Parker's analysis was supported by the *Sporting Life's* review of the British Olympic trials, held on 18 May at Stamford Bridge, the so-called "home of English athletics", which described the conditions as "by no means an ideal ground for events which need a grass circle or run up."<sup>57</sup> Although the stadium had been refurbished in 1905, provision of quality field event facilities had seemingly not been part of the planning. These trials occurred some six weeks before the Olympic athletic events took place in Stockholm and the field event results from the competition are shown in table one.

**Insert Table One here.**

A comparison of trial results with medal winning performances at the 1908 Olympics is informative. The winning distances in the javelin and standing long jump would not have been good enough to make their respective 1908 Olympic finals, while the winning distances in other events would have achieved no higher than sixth in any previous Olympic final. Completely missing are any pole vault or triple jump results, the latter not being held at the trials, although Timothy Carroll represented Britain in Stockholm, while the former did not feature because, not for the first time, there was not a single entry.

#### THE 1912 OLYMPICS

The elitism of the British Olympic Movement was reflected by the large number of Oxbridge athletes included in the 1912 Stockholm team although the AAA remained concerned that many athletes "appeared to have no regular system of training" and that there had been a "lack of implements" available for field events.<sup>58</sup> The chief athletics trainer was Alec Nelson, coach to Cambridge University, and his appointment was well received, although there were reservations, since he was believed to lack the breadth of knowledge of field events as demonstrated by American-based coaches.<sup>59</sup> These Games represented the first marker of the work of the AFEA and, although expectations had been low, there had been hope of success in the hammer from Scotsman Thomas Nicolson, who had finished fourth in 1908, and Irishman Denis Carey. Nicolson's form during 1912 hinted that he might medal in Stockholm, following victories in both the Scottish and English National Championships, with throws of 48.23 meters and 49.43 meters respectively, but he was ultimately unable to compete because of his farming commitments.<sup>60</sup> Limerick-born Carey did go to Stockholm but only managed sixth place, apparently because of the use of an "absurd guard board" at the front of the throwing circle that affected his style.<sup>61</sup> Overall, the results confirmed expectations, as none of the nine field events men brought home a medal, leading to widespread Press criticism.<sup>62</sup> W. Beach-Thomas claimed that Britain's athletes "could not jump either broad or high; we could not throw the javelin," although it should be noted that Britain did not actually enter anyone in the javelin, or the pole vault and shot put.<sup>63</sup> As for the jumping contests, British athletes performed badly in standing events, but did better in the running events, without, as table two shows, threatening the podium.

**Insert Table Two here.**

The overall British performance in Stockholm was disappointing. The Duke of Westminster described it as a "national disaster" and "Old Blue", a regular columnist in *Sporting Life*, believed that it signaled the "end of an era" for British sport. The former Oxbridge athlete continued, "the long lead which this country took about the middle of last century in almost all branches of sport has, as well we all know, been woefully diminished to-day."<sup>64</sup> The *Daily Mail* mournfully remarked, "our position in the world of sport is not only challenged, it is practically usurped."<sup>65</sup> Britain had won just two track events (Arnold Jackson in the 1500 meters and the 4 x 100 meter relay) and this resulted in further criticism with *The Times* declaring that not enough was being done to promote field events, even though there was a "mass of material."<sup>66</sup> A *Daily Mail* editorial was more constructive in arguing that:

Before the Olympic Games are held in Berlin in 1916 it is essential that British athletes, if they intend to restore the prestige of Great Britain, should apply themselves assiduously to these field events. It is true that most of them do not figure in the programmes of athletic meetings held in Great Britain, but with the Olympic championship in view and the importance of obtaining every point clearly demonstrated by our defeat at Stockholm, there should be every incentive for specialisation in them.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the efforts of the AFEA and the AAC, several issues surrounding field events had clearly not yet been resolved, leading Webster to argue that overall success in Berlin would "be greatly enhanced by paying more attention to this branch of athletics."<sup>68</sup> Despite his comments, the long-standing problems of commercialism and amateur notions of the "university athlete" remained significant barriers. *The Times* remarked that field events could not "make the same vivid appeal to the emotions as is made by a desperate finish on the track." No matter how exciting the throws looked, they "do not send 20,000 people in hysterics, as did the finish in some of the running events," while International Olympic Committee member, Rev. De Courcy Laffan observed that "the average British spectator does not care two straws" about field events.<sup>69</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* highlighted wider amateur beliefs about the relationship between sport and sociability, noting that "a young man in England would find it rather dull and lonely to spend much of his spare time in putting weights and throwing javelins - there is not enough competition to make these occupations sociable."<sup>70</sup>

Following Stockholm, the AAC called a meeting to address "England's failures" and develop a "scheme to restore British prestige" at which tensions over coaching emerged between those who wanted to import an American trainer and those who argued that English training methods could match the Americans.<sup>71</sup> There were also debates about whether or not Britain should compete at future Olympics, although it was generally agreed that participation should continue and that solutions should be found as to how performances could be improved.<sup>72</sup> Between 1913 and the outbreak of war in 1914, the British Olympic Council (BOC) was at the forefront of attempts to improve British prospects. In March 1913, it formed a "Special Committee for the Olympic Games of Berlin", a group separate from the main council, but given the brief to investigate "what steps would needed to enable Great Britain to make a worthy showing at Berlin, and what would be the expense of carrying out those steps."<sup>73</sup> Although this committee resigned in January 1914, after they failed to raise their immediate target of £20,000, its formation suggested something of a shift in attitude towards notions of amateurism and the idealistic vision of the "university athlete."<sup>74</sup>

One of the first actions of this committee was to request that national sporting associations submit plans for improving performance for 1916. The AAA focused on field events, highlighting the provision of equipment and the holding of regular field events, a continuation of the work they had begun in 1910.<sup>75</sup> The AFEA were among the first to formulate their ideas, which centered upon improving the number of athletes competing, increasing competitive opportunities, and the employment of better standards of coaching around the country.<sup>76</sup> As ever, funding this proved challenging and the AFEA were relying on the BOC for a handout, especially in its plans for the hiring of a coach for field events. Financial limitations meant that the only appointment made initially was of field event all-rounder Alfred Flaxman (Oxford University) and this was only on a voluntary basis. Flaxman was a member of the AFEA and had previously competed in the discus, Greek discus, javelin and standing high jump events at the 1908 Olympics and at the 1912 Olympic trials in the hammer, which he had won, although he had not gone on to represent Britain in Stockholm. Restrictions on expenses and his own time meant that Flaxman worked solely with clubs in Southern England. His appointment was followed by those of S.S. Abrahams (Cambridge), W.E.B. Henderson, F.A.M. Webster and A.B. George.<sup>77</sup> Apart from these efforts, the activities of the AFEA were limited to encouraging individual clubs to organize more field events and working with the AAC to find and train extra amateur coaches.<sup>78</sup>

Despite continuing apathy, the AFEA continued to promote field events, such as hosting an "Olympic sports meeting" at Crystal Palace that included the "abnormal" field events of discus and javelin.<sup>79</sup> The AAA also

aided field events via financial contributions in 1914 and, in July, it donated £500 through its Ways and Means Committee to provide impedimenta and pay the travelling expenses of "Assistant Trainers," with any remaining balance being spent on the promotion of field athletics. Athletes still faced recurring problems over equipment with "promising novices" having to "borrow some from others more fortunately situated," an issue that severely hampered those wishing to start out in the events.<sup>80</sup> This shortage was recorded by the *Athletic News* in July, which observed that in the Northern and Midland Districts, "there is not a discus or a javelin in the whole of these counties." Emil R. Voight, winner of the 1908 Olympic five-mile race, blamed the "laissez-faire" attitude of the AAA, who had "not yet seem to have awakened to the fact that field events count just as many points in the Olympic Games as running events," and argued that the "cultivation of field events" would help Britain "regain lost laurels" at future Olympic Games.<sup>81</sup>

The pressure created by the AFEA, the AAC and other interested parties led to a breakthrough in 1914 when the AAA decided to include all Olympic field events in its Championships for the first time, a move that undoubtedly helped their national profile. Another major step forward came in January 1914, with the appointment of Walter Knox as national athletics coach. Canadian Knox had won the professional all-round World Championship in 1912, 1913, and 1914, and the *Sporting Life* believed he was "perhaps the best all-round athlete in the world."<sup>82</sup> His expertise, particularly in the pole vault and shot, was undoubtedly needed and his appointment represented something of a compromise between the warring parties over professional coaching since he was familiar with American methods but had an Empire and British heritage.

In an interview with the *Athletic News*, Knox argued that America were the world's leading athletic nation because "whether they ran, or jumped, or put the shot, they were taught in the first instance how to run, jump, or put in the right manner." Knox also felt that a lack of competitive opportunities meant that British athletes were apathetic towards field events since "athletes refused to devote their attention to this branch of the sport because there were so few opportunities to gain distinction as could the running men."<sup>83</sup> He remained optimistic, however, and the AAA noted in July that the "chief coach is very emphatic that we have the material if opportunities could only be provided for many competitors in Olympic Field Events." Knox was also reported as saying that he was "very satisfied with the results attained up to the present," and he was "confident that if the matters referred to can be adjusted, very great and permanent improvement will be shown, in not only track Athletics but also Field Athletics."<sup>84</sup> Despite his enthusiasm, Knox made little impact on the standard of British field athletics, although Britain's leading high jumper Howard Baker later noted that Knox had changed him from

using the "schoolboyish" scissors style to the "cut-off" technique, resulting in Baker setting an English record of 1.95 meters in 1914.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the years leading up to 1914, the British fears that the nation was in decline were accelerated by the recruitment for, and performance in, the Second Boer War and the rising economic and political influence of nations such as the USA and Germany. International sporting defeats and poor performances at the Olympic Games, especially in 1912, exacerbated these fears as did the sinking of the Titanic and the loss of Captain Scott in the Antarctic. While the 1908 track events had masked poor field events performances the failure of Britain's track athletes in Stockholm exposed the deficiencies of its field events athletes. Although contemporary commentators considered this as evidence of a "decline", in fact Britain had never been prominent in field events. Sydney Brookes, writing in the *Observer* in 1912, explained that previous British athletic successes had been achieved because "we were first to play games on a large scale," and that, in the early years of international sport "we were second-raters and they were fifth-raters."<sup>86</sup> While Britain had not moved on, other nations had developed their field event skills over the intervening years to the point where Britain had been superseded by nations who had now become "first-raters." Field events failure was simply an easy target for those looking to apportion blame, and it was certainly an area where improvement could be made, but the attempts of the AAC and the AFEA to address this were relatively insignificant when balanced against systematic nationwide attempts in the USA and in Sweden to achieve field event success.

The work of both the AAC and the AFEA ended in the summer of 1914 and Knox departed later that year.<sup>87</sup> These interventions were always going to take time to make an impact and there is little evidence that British field events performances improved in this period, although Knox's appointment had marked a significant shift in the AAA's thinking about the place of field events in the British athletic program. He had brought a degree of North American specialization and knowledge that was needed and his work had supplemented the efforts made by the AFEA and the AAC to increase the number of competitions and to provide technical expertise. In these respects, Knox's appointment, and the efforts of both organizations from 1910 onwards, had had some success in stimulating a different British athletic identity, one that had the potential to transform the way that British athletics were organized and to facilitate a vision of "athletics" that encompassed all Olympic events.

However, in many respects, any successes were limited to making minor structural changes to the British organizational framework and these interventions failed to make any long-term impact on an athletic psyche that continued to prioritize the "university athlete" and amateur rather than professional coaching. This is testimony to the way in which the men who formed the AAA in 1880 had managed to impose their own values onto the athletic world in such a short space of time. By 1908, the amateur preference for a symmetrical athletic body that could display style and "dash", as typified by the middle-distance university man, and its rejection of specialized coaching and body types, had become so deeply embedded into notions of what it meant to be a gentleman amateur that it would take years to affect change. The provision of amateur coaches from their own social class and social circles, rather than professional coaches, merely helped to perpetuate these attitudes, even in those cases where these amateurs had field event expertise, and failed to redress decades of neglect. In addition, debates between, and within, the AAC and the AEFA about the future direction of team selection, whether to continue to focus on Oxbridge athletes or to try to democratize track and field athletics, remained unresolved by the end of 1914.

The British identity that emerged from four years of war was very different to that of 1914 but any hopes that field event performances might be improved quickly dissipated. In many respects, the immediate post-War period witnessed a return to a time before the advent of the AAC and the AEFA and the loss of some of the prime movers of these organizations, such as Flaxman, did not help. Facilities had been neglected and funding for field events implements was difficult to find, although the £100 prescribed by the AAA in March 1919 indicated that field events had not been forgotten, even though money for professional coaches was not forthcoming.<sup>88</sup> At the 1920 Antwerp Games, Britain's throwers and jumpers were once again at the back of the field and many of Britain's seven entrants in these disciplines missed their respective finals. The best performances were the sixth places achieved by Baker in the high jump and the aging Tom Nicolson in the hammer. The depictions of field events in the Press also echoed those commonly found in the pre-War period, with the *Manchester Guardian* describing the Olympic final of the triple jump competition as "tedious."<sup>89</sup> At home, field events were clearly not an attraction for the record number of spectators at the 1920 AAA Championships. The *Sporting Life* reported "the crowd did not wait to see the finish of the javelin throw and pole jump," (in which there was no home entrant) and felt that it was time "that the AAA dropped this latter, more acrobatic event than athletic event, for which there is seldom real competition."<sup>90</sup>



Despite the professionalization of athletics towards the end of the twentieth century, an increase in television coverage, sponsorship deals and the hosting of two further Olympics in London, the legacy left by Victorian and Edwardian gentleman amateurs continues to exert its influence within the British track and field environment. Modern day British athletics might well have evolved beyond the confines of the "university athlete" ideal, with the targeted funding of a range of Olympic athletes and world-class coaches, but the lack of success in field events remains a significant feature of its international performances. This is particularly true in the throwing events and any analysis of Olympic medal tables over the last hundred years would highlight that, apart from three or four talented individuals, British athletes have failed to "make a mark", despite strenuous efforts within the throwing community to raise the profile of their events. Given the commercial nature of modern sport, this situation might continue unchecked until British throwing coaches can uncover some high profile, photogenic athletes who will be able to drag the sport out of its amateur shackles.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Andrea Cook, *The Fourth Olympiad: The Official Report of the Olympic Games 1908* (London: The British Olympic Association, 1908), 145; BOA Committee, 2 December 1906, 3, File BOA/M/1/1, BOA Collection, University of East London Archives, Docklands Campus.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew P. Llewellyn and John Gleaves, *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism* (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 2016), 15, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Dilwyn Porter and Stephen Wagg, *Amateurism in British Sport: It Matters Not Who Won or Lost?* (London: Routledge, 2013); Dave Day, "Massaging the Amateur Ethos: Professional Coaches at Stockholm in 1912," *Sport in History* 32.2 (2012): 157-182.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted at this point that international athletics was overwhelmingly a male activity in the period before the First World War and thus the paper inevitably focuses on the male athlete.

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Holt, "The Amateur Body and the Middle-class Man: Work, Health and Style in Victorian Britain," *Sport in History* 26.3 (2006): 362-363; J.A. Mangan, "'Oars and the Man': Pleasure and Purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 1.3 (1984): 245-271; "Philathlete Extraordinary: A Portrait of the Victorian Moralizer Edward Bowen," *Journal of Sport History* 9.3 (1982): 23-40.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew P. Llewellyn, "'The Best Distance Runner the World Has Ever Produced': Hannes Kolehmainen and the Modernisation of British Athletics," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29.7 (2012): 1016-1034.

<sup>7</sup> Montague Shearman, *Athletics and Football* (London: Badminton Library, 1889), 52-53.

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Henri W. Pleket, "The Olympic Games in Antiquity," *European Review* 12.3 (2004): 409.
- <sup>9</sup> Dave Day and Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, "Delineating Professional and Amateur Athletic Bodies in Victorian England," *Sport in History* 35.1 (2015): 19-45.
- <sup>10</sup> Henry Hoole (M.D.), *The Science and Art of Training; A Handbook for Athletes* (London: Trübner, 1888), 20-26.
- <sup>11</sup> Day and Oldfield, "Delineating Professional and Amateur Athletic Bodies," 19-45.
- <sup>12</sup> William Curtis, "The International Athletics Match," *Outing* XXVII (November 1895): 157-164.
- <sup>13</sup> Webster, F. A. M. *Olympian Field Events; Their History and Practice* (London: George Newnes Ltd, 1913), 15, 16, 24, 25, 32, 40.
- <sup>14</sup> *Badminton Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, July 1899, 65.
- <sup>15</sup> Con Leahy (high jump) and Denis Horgan (shot put).
- <sup>16</sup> Derek Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, (Trowbridge: Manchester University Press, 1996), 240.
- <sup>17</sup> Webster, F. A. M. *Olympian Field Events*, 3; 'Olympic Games: A critical review', *Sporting Life*, 28 July 1908, 2, 5; 'The Olympic Games', *The Times*, 21 July 1908, 15.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> C.B. Fry "Editorial," *C.B. Fry's Magazine*, April 1908, 3.
- <sup>20</sup> A.B. George, "An Athletes' Advisory Club," *Manchester Guardian*, 23 December 1911, 14.
- <sup>21</sup> "Seek Talent for Olympic Games. England Aroused to Effort to Redeem Herself from Last Year's Defeat," *Evening Star, Washington DC*. 23 May 1913, 4; "England Looking for Olympic Athletes," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 18 June 1913, 7; "American Athletes Rouse English Jealousy," *Times-Picayune (New Orleans, Louisiana)*, 8 June 1913, 35.
- <sup>22</sup> A.B. George. Correspondence, "The Olympic Games," *London Standard*, 4 March 1913, 6.
- <sup>23</sup> "The Sporting World. Wake up, England," *North China Herald*, 11 September 1909, 32-33; *Evening Star (NZ)*, 27 September 1909, 8.
- <sup>24</sup> "The Sporting World. Athletics," *New York Evening Post*, 13 November 1909, 6; *Evening Star (NZ)*, 10 December 1909, 1.
- <sup>25</sup> A.B. George, "An Athletes' Advisory Club," *Manchester Guardian*, 23 December 1911, 14; "The Sporting World. Athletics," *Otago Standard and Wallace County Chronicle*, 16 June 1914, 7.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*; "British Athletics: Training and Snobbery," *Grey River Argus*, 23 October 1912, 7; "Olympic Lessons: Scheme to Restore British Prestige," *Straits Times*, 28 August 1912, 2.
- <sup>27</sup> W. Beach Thomas, "How to Win at the Olympic Games. Meeting in London Today. Need of £5,000 per Year," *Daily Mail*, 1 August 1912, 5.
- <sup>28</sup> "The Olympic Games," *Observer*, 31 December 1911, 14.
- <sup>29</sup> "The Sporting World. Advising Athletes" *Otago Standard and Wallace County Chronicle, (NZ)* 9 April 1912, 2; "Athletes' Advisory Club", *The Times*, 3 February 1914, 11.

---

<sup>30</sup> A.B. George, "An Athletes' Advisory Club," 14.

<sup>31</sup> "News of the Athletes," *The Sun* (NY) 29 October 1911, 10.

<sup>32</sup> "Athletics," *North China Herald*, 17 January 1914, 166; "The Olympic Games. England's Activity. The Question of Coaching," *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 24 September 1913, 4.

<sup>33</sup> "England now Shaking a foot for next year's Olympic Games," *Muskegon Chronicle* (*Muskegon, Michigan*), 8 January 1912, 11; "England Keen for Olympiad Titles. British Athletes Eager to Avenge Defeat of Three Years Ago. Searching for Talent and Revising Training Methods," *Buffalo Courier*, 16 January 1912, 10; "Englishmen Laying for Americans in Olympic Contests. Will Strengthen Departments in Which They Met Defeat," *Washington Times*, 17 January 1912, 15.

<sup>34</sup> "The Olympic Games. England's Activity. The Question of Coaching," *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 24 September 1913, 4.

<sup>35</sup> "Athletics," *North China Herald*, 7 February 1914, 26.

<sup>36</sup> "The Sporting World. Jealousy," *Evening Star*, 5 October 1912, 12.

<sup>37</sup> "Sports and Pastimes. International Athletics," *Telegraph* (*Brisbane, Qld*), 16 February 1929, 7.

<sup>38</sup> A.B. George. Decies Commission Day 2, 16 October 1923, 17; Dr A. Abrahams. Decies Commission Day 5, 19 October 1923, 68.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes, Whitsuntide Sport, Field Events Association," *Sporting Life*, 11 May 1910, 1.

<sup>40</sup> "The Encouragement of Field Events, Formation of the British Amateur Association," *Sporting Life*, 9 May 1910, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "The Revival of English Athleticism," *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 10 June 1910, 10; "A British Field Events Association has been Formed," *Referee* (*Sydney, NSW*), 22 June 1910, 9; *STAR*, (NZ) 2 July 1910, 5; "Athletics. Field Events," *The Times*, 21 July 1910, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Strephon, "Topics of the Track, the Field Events Association," *Athletic News*, 23 May 1910, 2.

<sup>44</sup> "To Study our Athletics. English Sportsmen Profit by the Lesson of the Olympic Games," *Kansas City Star*, 29 May 1910.

<sup>45</sup> "Proposed British Amateur Field Events Association," *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 14 May 1910, 16; "A 'Field Events' Association," *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 16 May 1910, 12; "New Athletic Association," *London Daily News*, 19 May 1910, 8; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 19 May 1910, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *MCAA General Committee Meeting*. 5 May and 2 June 1910. Meetings were held in Derby, Northampton, Ellesmere, Rugby and several locations in Birmingham. File ATH/MCAAA. AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>47</sup> Strephon, "Topics of the Track, the Field Events Association," 2.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes, Field Event Organisation," *Sporting Life*, 4 May 1910, 2; Ian Tempest, *Pole Vault*, (self-published, 2010), 51-52.

<sup>49</sup> *AAA General Committee Minutes*. 9 April 1910. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

---

<sup>50</sup> "Athletics: Field Events Association," *The Times*, 21 July 1910, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes," *Sporting Life*, 20 July 1910, 2; Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes, the need to promote Field Events," *Sporting Life*, 27 July 1910, 2.

<sup>52</sup> "AAA Championships, Field Events," *Athletic News*, 4 July 1910, p 2.

<sup>53</sup> Pinex, "Current Athletics. Field Events and the Coming Olympic Games," *London Evening News*, 10 June 1911, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lovesey, *The Official Centenary History of the Amateur Athletic Association*, (Derby: Guinness, 1980): 55-56. The Events were: Standing high and long jumps, triple jump, 220 and 440 yard hurdles, discus and javelin, slinging the 56lb weight and putting the 16lb weight for height.

<sup>55</sup> "Rayleigh Sports and Carnival," *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 1 September 1911, 7.

<sup>56</sup> AAA letter by Parker, 6 March 1912. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham

<sup>57</sup> "English Trials, full details of the Events," *Sporting Life*, 20 May 1912, 7.

<sup>58</sup> "College Athletes ready for Olympic Games," *New York Times*, 17 May 1912; AAA Olympic Committee, 9 March 1912, File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>59</sup> Nelson in the Census: 1891 (RG12/634); 1901 (RG13/928); 1911 (RG14PN352RG78PN11); *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 27 May 1912, 10; for Nelson biography see Ian Stone, 'Alec Nelson: Professional Runner, Athletics Coach and "Entrepreneur-Client"' in *Sporting Lives* ed. Dave Day (Manchester: MMU Institute for Performance Research, 2011): 88-111.

<sup>60</sup> David Phillips, *The Games Draw Near but are the British Managers "of any use whatever"* (self-published, 2010), 6.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green* (Cork: University of Cork Press, 2010), 266.

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, "The Games Draw Near", 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Britain's Olympic Remorse," *Literary Digest*. 3 August 1912, 180, quoted in Matthew P. Llewellyn, "A Nation Divided: Great Britain and the Pursuit of Olympic Excellence 1912-1914," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28.5 (2011): 403; There were two Javelin events at Stockholm, the two-handed competition, where the combined scores of throws with left and right arms were added together to make a distance, and the single-handed.

<sup>64</sup> "The Nation and the Olympic Games," *The Times*, 27 September 1913, 13; Old Blue, "Rowing," *Sporting Life*, 13 April 1912, 7.

<sup>65</sup> "Why We Lose at Sport," *Daily Mail*, 10 July 1912, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Special Correspondent, "British Athletes and the Olympic Games: The Need for Organization, Hidden and Undeveloped Talent," *The Times*, 1 August 1912, 6.

<sup>67</sup> "Olympic Games: Neglect of Field Events," *Daily Mail*, 7 August 1912, 6.

<sup>68</sup> "The Javelin, How to Throw it, Events for the Olympic Games," *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1912, 7.

<sup>69</sup> "Athletics: Field Events," *The Times*, 3 August 1912, 9; Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes," *Sporting Life*, 7 August 1912, 1.

---

<sup>70</sup> "The Olympic Games," *Manchester Guardian*, 22 July 1912, 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 August 1912, 2; *Otautau Standard and Wallace County Chronicle*, 1 July, 1913, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Llewellyn, "A Nation Divided", 402.

<sup>73</sup> 'Special Correspondent at Stockholm in 1912, "Britain and the Olympic Games: Review of the Situation," *The Times*, 22 September 1913, 29.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Otway, "The Olympic Failure, a Reply to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle," *Sporting Life*, 12 January 1914, 1.

<sup>75</sup> S. Blair, "Preparations for Berlin, Schemes of the Associations," *The Times*, 29 August 1913, 13.

<sup>76</sup> "British Olympic Council Meeting," *The Times*, 26 April 1913, 15; AAA 'Parks and Open Spaces' report, November 1913. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>77</sup> "Olympic Athletes. Englishmen to be Trained Free of Charge," *London Standard*, 16 April 1913, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Otway, "Athletic Notes," *Sporting Life*, 23 April 1913, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Lovesey, "Conan Doyle and the Olympics," *Journal of Olympic History*, 10 (2001): 9.

<sup>80</sup> P.L Fisher, 9 July 1914. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>81</sup> Emil Voight, "England's Need, where the Olympic Scheme Fails," *Athletic News*, 13 July 1914, 2.

<sup>82</sup> "Canadian Team for Olympic Games," *Sporting Life*, 25 June 1912, 2; 'The Olympic Games', *Nottingham Evening Post*, January 16, 1914, reported Knox's previous performances. Running high jump, 5ft 4½in., 56lb weight, 22ft 4in., pole vault, 11ft 3in., hammer, 102ft 3in., 100 yards, 10 3-5secs, three standing jumps, 31ft 5½in., discus, 104ft, 120 yards hurdles, 19sec, 16lb shot, 41ft 9½in., running long jump, 20ft 10in.

<sup>83</sup> "AAA Training, Mr W R Knox's Views," *Athletic News*, 20 April 1914, 7.

<sup>84</sup> Draft AAA letter to Mr Studd. 9 July 1914. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>85</sup> Lovesey, *The Official Centenary History of the AAA*, 119-120.

<sup>86</sup> Sydney Brookes, "British Olympic failures, Are we decadent at sport," *Observer*, 14 July 1912, 18.

<sup>87</sup> AAA General Committee, 3 September 1914. File 1/2/4/1, AAA: Birmingham.

<sup>88</sup> AAA Special Olympic Committee, 19 March 1919. File ATH/AAA/1/2/4/1 AAA: Birmingham

<sup>89</sup> "The Olympic Games," *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1920, 7.

<sup>90</sup> "The AAA Championships," *Sporting Life*, 5 July 1920, 2.